

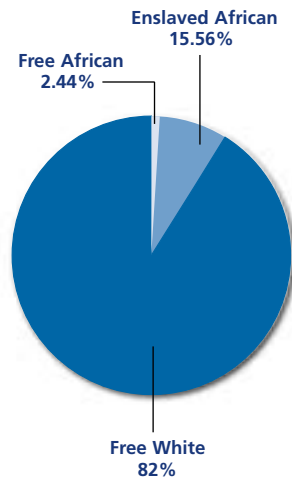
## Chapter 1

# Africa in America: An Introduction

Illustration 1

### 1830 Census

Percent of the United States'  
12.8 million person population  
by race.



\*Less than one percent of population was alien (foreign born, not naturalized).

†Native Americans were not enumerated in the census until 1870.

Source: United States Historical Census Browser, compiled by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

*Since its origins, what is now the United States has been a nation of immigrants. Its populace is derived of people from countries all across the globe.*

*Hundreds of indigenous American Indian tribes were already present in the sixteenth century when several European groups and a sizable number of Africans began to arrive. Later, groups from Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America, and many other corners of the globe arrived on the North American continent and made it their home. This phenomenon continues today, where new Americans arrive in the United States, adapt their cultures to the environment of the New World, and transform the national culture of the United States.*

Of all the ethnicities, West and Central African emigrants comprised one of the largest groups to arrive in the United States during the colonial era.\* Seventeenth and eighteenth century ship ledgers and insurance rolls teem with names of the various West and Central African ethnic groups: Wolof, Fon, Yorubá, Igbo, Fang, Mandinka, and Kongo, to name a few. African people were found throughout the American colonies, from Maine to Florida, and Mexico to Canada. By 1830, the U.S. census indicates that 2.3 million of the 12.8 million people in the United States were of African descent.<sup>(1)</sup>

Given the large number of Africans in the United States, African culture contributed greatly to the cultural and historical composition of America. The people themselves brought scientific and technological knowledge systems from West and Central Africa. African thought and creativity interacted with European cultural practices and influenced the language and the creative arts. More subtle influences include geographical

\* "Emigrant," as opposed to "immigrant," is used to denote the forced migration of West and Central Africans to the European colonies in America.

place-names with African etymologies. The imprint of Africa on America is a major, and unique, factor in making this American culture.

To further the recognition of African influence on American culture, the National Park Service published this document to summarize current scholarship, cite examples of African-influenced places in its cultural resources programs, and offer a resource list for groups and individuals interested in this topic. The publication provides examples of African cultural heritage in the United States and how Africanisms are interpreted at historic sites. The purpose of this publication is to encourage a greater understanding of Africanisms, aspects of culture found in the New World with African antecedents. In addition, it is hoped that this publication will encourage a stronger connection between historic preservation activity and academic research in the study of Africanisms.

### What are Africanisms?

As defined by Holloway in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Africanisms are “elements of culture found in the New World traceable to an African origin.”<sup>(2)</sup> Africanisms manifest themselves in numerous aspects of American culture. From language to architecture, they surround us. Some are easily identifiable, like Congo Square, now a part of Louis Armstrong Park in New Orleans. Others, like dugout canoes in the Chesapeake, are not as easily recognized. They show up in how Americans cook and what they eat, for example, gumbo and rice. Other foods like watermelon, black-eyed peas, sorghum, and millet entered into American foodways from Africa. In the arts, jazz, blues, and rock-and-roll are stamped with African influences, as is bluegrass, with its signature instrument, the banjo, being of African origin. As often as not, how a space was used is an Africanism, as in the case of the African Burial Ground in New York, or the use of a crossroad for a religious ceremony.

Identifying Africanisms may require additional research and analysis beyond a direct one-to-one connection with Africa. The context for a place or an object may be recognized as African American, but the African cultural connection will need further illumination and documentation. Interpreting a site or park’s Africanness may mean explaining the migration process by which the people found themselves in certain locations. It may also mean examining aspects of West and Central African practices, as well as material culture.



**Illustration 2:**  
Africanisms are “elements of culture found in the New World traceable to an African origin” as with the African gourd and animal skin covered fiddle (above right) that, by the 1800s, had evolved into the American banjo (above left).

Photo courtesy of the Blue Ridge Institute and Museums

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*The questions that creolization raises are: when do cultures begin to meld and what is it that each brings to the confluence?*

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The study of Africanisms is tied to the study of African American history, and more directly to the study of creolization of African and European cultures, which is the essence of African American culture. The questions that creolization raises are: when do cultures begin to meld and what is it that each brings to the confluence? As it concerns African Americans, creolization encompasses the relationship of African to African American, Afro-Caribbean to African American, and African and Native cultures to European culture, and vice versa. Historian and poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite describes creolization as “a cultural action—material, psychological and spiritual—based on the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment...to each other.”<sup>(3)</sup> Anthropologists James Deetz, in *In Small Things Forgotten*, and Grey Gundaker, in *Signs of Diaspora/Diaspora of Signs*, use creolization as a way to discuss African cultural reflections within American culture.<sup>(4)</sup> Scholars, such as John Vlach, view America as having a triple heritage—African, European, and Native American. The resulting blended culture is crucial to interpreting American material culture.<sup>(5)</sup> Thus, Africanisms are rarely “pure” transfers of African culture to the Americas, but a blending with other cultures to produce the unique American culture.

### Scholarship on Africanisms

The study of Africanisms gained academic currency in the last 60 years with Melville J. Herskovits’ seminal work published in 1941, *The Myth of the Negro Past*.<sup>(6)</sup> Herskovits, an anthropologist, argued for the role of Africans in the development of the culture of the Americas. His research challenged the widespread belief that there were no African roots in North American or even African American culture. Herskovits’ work was a response to the work of sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. In his 1939 publication, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Frazier theorized that African Americans lost any sense of heritage or unique culture due to the devastating effects of slavery, although he acknowledged that African cultural retentions were strong in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>(7)</sup> Frazier’s point-of-view prevailed in much of scholarly work until the rebirth of interest in African culture following the rise of Black Studies programs in colleges and universities in the 1960s and 1970s.

The search for and discussions regarding African influences did not originate with Frazier and Herskovits, but the Frazier-Herskovits debate played out against a developing backdrop of other scholarly endeavors. Historian Elizabeth Donnan edited a collection of ships' records and other documents dealing with the slave trade for the Carnegie Institution. *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, published in four volumes from 1930-1935, provided demographic information as to the magnitude of the trade and destinations of Africans involved.<sup>(8)</sup> Anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston collected folk tales, songs, and information on voodoo in an anthropological field study of southern African Americans in the late 1920s. The compilation, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, noted motifs in storytelling, and aspects of spirituality that resembled West African antecedents.<sup>(9)</sup>



**Illustration 3:**  
**Bob Lemmons was born enslaved in Texas around 1850. He travelled with his master and cattlemen during the Civil War searching for new range, and claims to have known border outlaws like Billy the Kid. This photo was taken in 1936 at Carrizo Springs, Texas.**

Photo courtesy of Farms Security Administration photographs collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

The federal government participated in documenting Africanisms in a manner similar to Hurston's field study. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) undertook an oral history survey of over 2,000 formerly enslaved men and women in 17 states, from 1936 to 1938. The WPA Slave Narrative Collection is filled with primarily first-person accounts from the formerly enslaved African

Americans. *Drums and Shadows*, a collection of interviews conducted by the WPA Georgia Writers' Project with African Americans on the Georgia coast, provided raw data about the persistence of African heritage in their culture during the 1930s.<sup>(10)</sup> Later, George Rawick collected the narratives into 19 volumes and an additional supplement series of 12 volumes, called *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.<sup>(11)</sup> In 1949, Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* documented the West and Central African language connections with the Gullah language spoken in coastal South Carolina.<sup>(12)</sup> These efforts preceded the national focus on the issues of race and equality. However, social forces would begin to commingle with academic scholarship.

The spirit of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s spilled into academia. Responding to African Americans' desire to see themselves represented in the history and culture of the United States, scholars began looking at slavery for information about African American culture. Historian Kenneth Stampp documented that slavery was not a paternalistic institution, but one of harshness and cruelty, which the enslaved actively rebelled against, in his 1956 book, *The*



**Illustration 4:**  
Low fired, unglazed pottery called colono-ware has been found at slave quarters on plantations in Virginia and the Carolinas. Recent scholarship attributes its creation to an African, as well as Native American, pottery tradition. This mended shallow bowl, with a tooled rim and applied flat base, was excavated at the Henry House, (Site 44PW293), Manassas National Battlefield Park, Manassas, Virginia.

Photo courtesy of Mia Parsons.

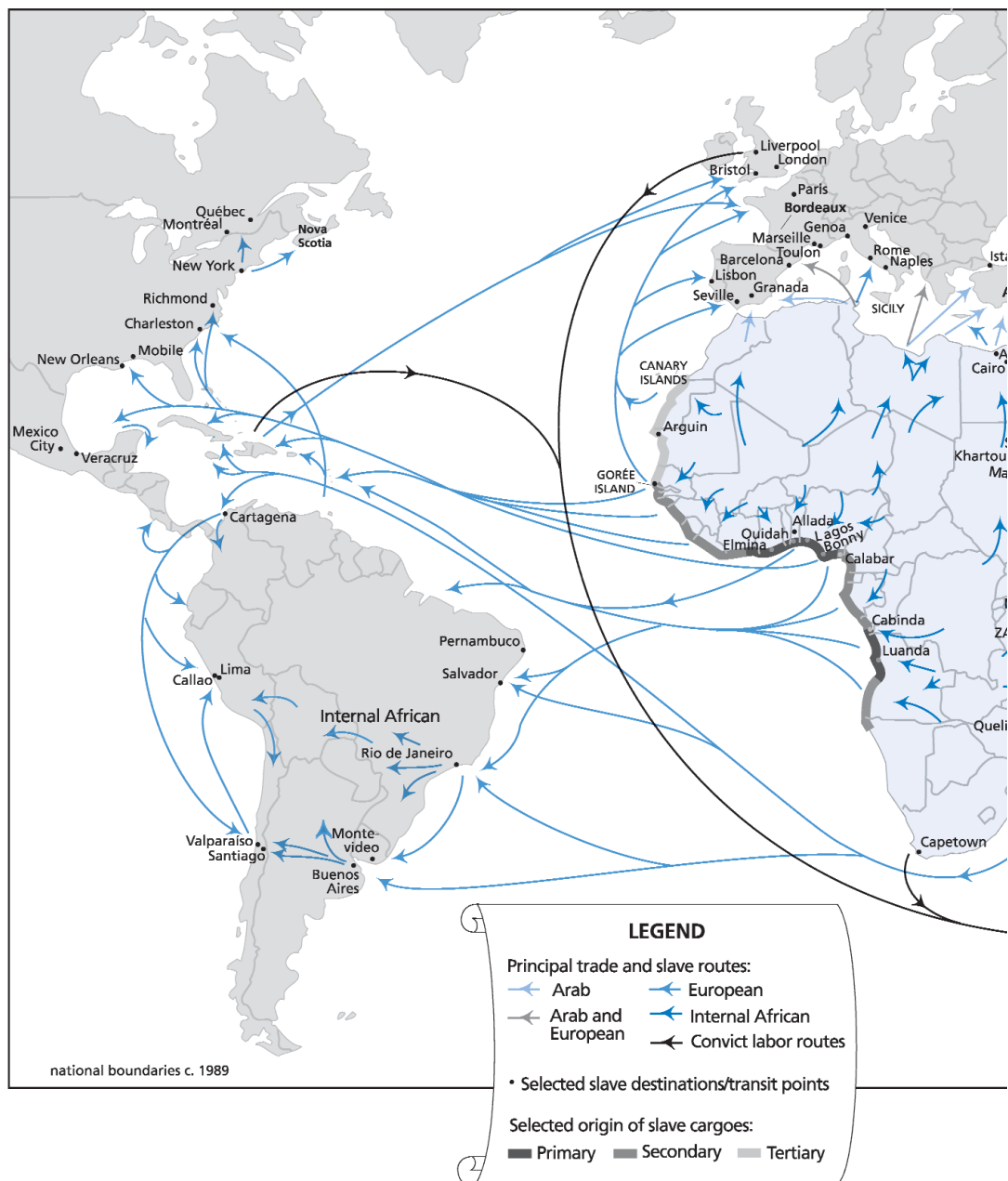
*Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South*.<sup>(13)</sup> This sort of historiography represented a new trend, one focusing on the actions of groups and individuals previously without a voice in the historical record. In 1969, Philip D. Curtin's book *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, traced from where the various West and Central African ethnicities came who made their mark in the Americas.<sup>(14)</sup> Curtin's work added vital demographic statistics to the study of Africans in the New World. Archeologist Charles Fairbanks investigated slave cabins at the Kingsley Plantation, Florida in 1969-1971. The excavation documented the material culture of the enslaved African American community. It focused on African American material cultural practices and their confluence within the larger society's culture.<sup>(15)</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s saw colleges and universities around the country establish Black Studies programs, the first of which was launched at San Francisco State University in 1967. Concurrently, an increase of scholarship addressing African American culture and its roots arose. Some scholars such as historians John Blassingame, with *The Slave Community* in 1972, Eugene Genovese, with *Roll, Jordan, Roll* in 1974, and Lawrence Levine, with *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* in 1977, among others, examined the distinctive aspects of enslaved African culture and suggested Africa as one of the sources of that distinctiveness.<sup>(16)</sup> Anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price argued for a New World precedent for African American culture in their *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past*, published in 1976.<sup>(17)</sup> New research and new interpretations of slavery encouraged scholars to examine how enslaved African Americans preserved elements of their African heritage and how that manifested itself within the dominant culture.

Published in 1983, *Flash of the Spirit* by Robert Farris Thompson is arguably the most influential book on this topic since Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past*.<sup>(18)</sup> Thompson's research on art and culture in the Afro-Caribbean/African American world encouraged an increased interest in Africanisms. In 1990, Leland Ferguson published *Uncommon Ground*.<sup>(19)</sup> Ferguson's research on colono-ware pottery in Virginia and the Carolinas revealed evidence of cultural syncretism: eighteenth-century material artifacts hold the imprint of West and Central African pottery skills and Native American design adapted to regional materials and European uses.

# The African Diaspora Map – I

Based on research by Joseph E. Harris



## Scope of the Dispersion to 1873

The primary purpose of this map is to show the general direction of the principal sea routes of Arab, European and American trade in African slaves up to 1873. The selected destinations include slave debarkation and settlement areas, ports visited by African crewmen, locations of slaves taken on home leave to England and France by slaveholders and military officers, and points in England and Canada where slaves were taken following the American War for Independence in 1783.

The overland routes in Africa supplied slaves to the northern, eastern and western coasts. Those slaves who came north via the Sahara Desert normally were shipped to Arab or Muslim areas across the Mediterranean Sea; those from the northeast, to Asia via the Red Sea; those from the East African coast, to Asia and the Americas; those from the West African coast, to Europe and the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean. Selected overland routes are indicated for the trade in Asia and the Americas. Finally, a series of agreements culminating with the Treaty of 1873 legally abolished the East African trade; earlier agreements had abolished the trade elsewhere in Africa.

A number of Africans was among the convict labor Britain sent to Australia from England, the West Indies, Mauritius and South Africa during the nineteenth century.

Africans also travelled and settled overseas as traders, missionaries, soldiers, adventurers, refugees, etc. But these usually involved small, unsustained, temporary movements of people prior to 1873 and are not included on this map.



**Illustration 5:**

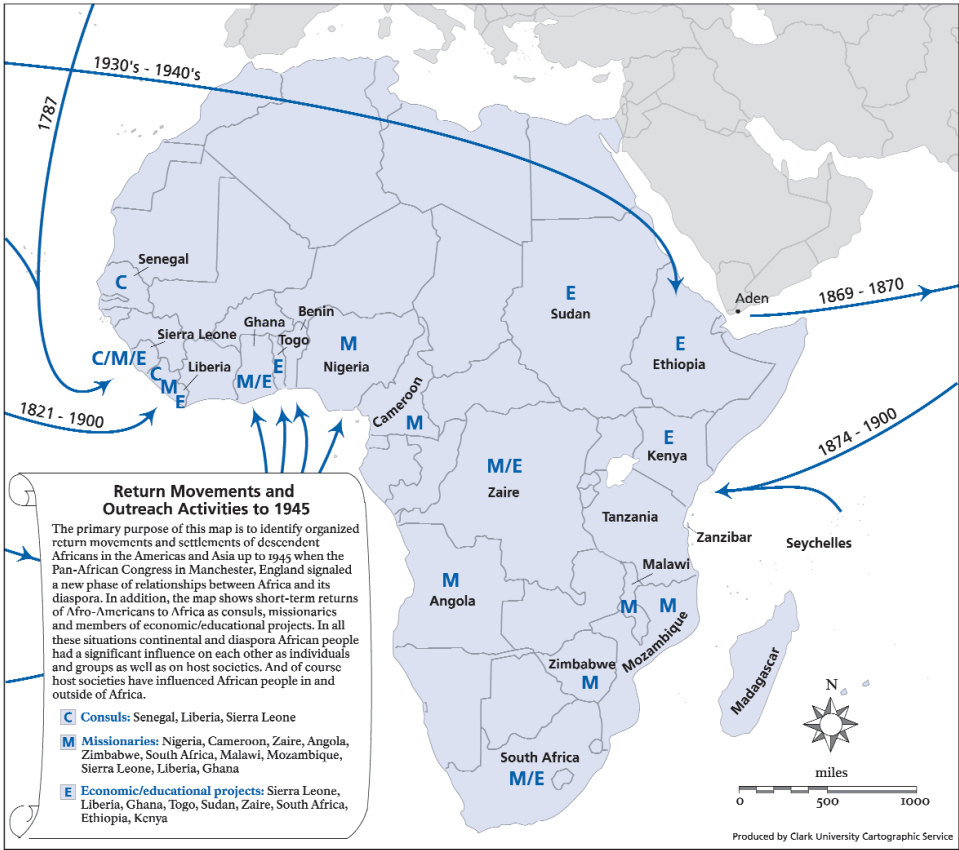
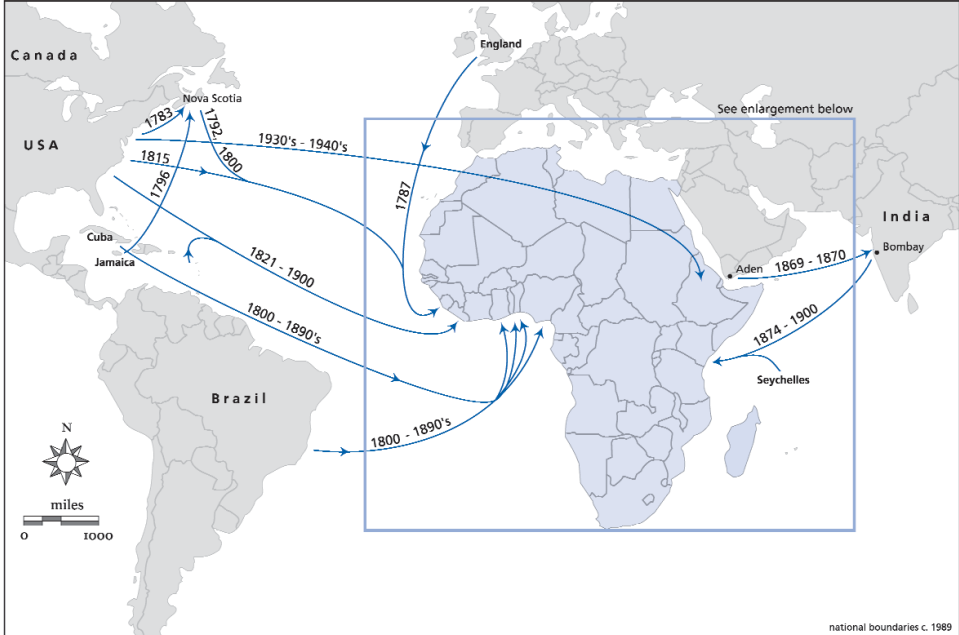
The African diaspora dates back close to two thousand years, and covers six of the seven continents.

Map courtesy of Joseph E. Harris



# The African Diaspora Map – II

Based on research by Joseph E. Harris





**Illustration 5a (left):  
A phase of diasporic  
movement is a return of  
migrant groups to Africa.**  
Map courtesy of Joseph E. Harris.

In 1991, Joseph E. Holloway's *Africanisms in American Culture* provided a collection of interdisciplinary essays on Africanisms in the United States.<sup>(20)</sup> A professor of Pan-African studies, Holloway documented scholarly views on the influences of African culture on American and African American culture. Historian and folklorist John Vlach gave additional credence to African cultural retentions in the New World with his research on African vernacular architecture and material culture. Vlach reported their effects on African American and Afro-Caribbean architecture in *By The Work of Their Hands*, in 1991, and *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* in 1978.<sup>(21)</sup> Historian Mechal Sobel argued for reciprocal influences of African and European material cultures in *The World They Made Together*, published in 1987.<sup>(22)</sup> In 1992, historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall published *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* that documented the presence and influence of Senegambians and their culture in the eighteenth century.<sup>(23)</sup> Scholarship by historian Joseph E. Harris presented a comprehensive look at the African diaspora, particularly using maps detailing the origins and destinations of African emigrants over the course of centuries. Furthermore, he argued for an inter-African melding, or syncretism, which recognizes the reflections of multiple African cultures and common African concepts and ideals within the Africa diaspora.<sup>(24)</sup> The cumulative effect of this scholarship was to make Africa in America visible again.<sup>(25)</sup>

### **African Dispersal and the African Diaspora**

Africans and their collective communities found around the world constitute the African diaspora. The African diaspora refers not only to the Americas, but also to global migration over millennia. (*Illustrations 5 and 5a, pages 6-8; Table 1, page 10*) African communities can be found historically in Asia, Europe, and Australia. Large communities exist throughout the Americas (North, Central, and South) and the Caribbean. Indeed, Coptic monks from Egypt and Ethiopia resided in Rome during the Middle Ages. Moorish control in Spain lasted 700 years. Moors were Muslim Africans from north-western Africa. Their most stunning monument, Alhambra, still stands in Granada. Habsi Kot was an Ethiopian fort in India, which contained the tombs of soldiers and nobles who fought with Malik Ambar, an Ethiopian commander who led a force of Africans and Asians to defend India in the seventeenth century. The Indian Ocean slave trade scattered Africans throughout Asia. Repatriate African communities were created in the Seychelles, in Bombay, and in Africa, such as Freretown, Kenya.

Countries in West and Central Africa Affected by the Atlantic Slave Trade*			
Senegal	Ivory Coast	Benin	Congo
Gambia	Liberia	Nigeria	Angola
Guinea Bissau	Sierra Leone	Cameroon	Madagascar
Guinea	Ghana	Equatorial Guinea	Mozambique
Mali	Togo	Gabon	Tanzania

\*The island of Madagascar is located off of the southeastern coast of Africa.  
Mozambique and Tanzania are in southeast Africa.

Historical Regional Names for Areas of West and Central Africa, and their Coordinating Countries*	
Historical Regional Name	Modern Country Names
Angola Coast ( <i>Thornton</i> )	Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo, Angola
Gold Coast ( <i>All sources</i> )	Ghana
Bight of Benin ( <i>Gomez</i> )	Togo, Benin, part of Nigeria
Bight of Biafra ( <i>Gomez</i> )	part of Nigeria, Cameroon, part of Gabon
Lower Guinea ( <i>Thornton</i> )	Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon
Mozambique-Madagascar ( <i>Gomez</i> )	Mozambique, Madagascar, Tanzania
Senegambia ( <i>Gomez</i> )	Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea
Slave Coast ( <i>Wolf</i> )	Bight of Benin
Upper Guinea ( <i>Thornton</i> )	Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia
Central Africa ( <i>Wolf</i> )	Gabon, Congo, Angola
Windward Coast ( <i>Gomez</i> )	Sierra Leone, Liberia
West Africa ( <i>Wolf</i> )	Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon

\*The parenthetical names refer to bibliographical sources for the regional names.

Sources: Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identity in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1440-1800*, Second edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

Table 1 and 1a (left):

The area along the West Coast of Africa from which Africans enslaved in the Atlantic slave trade were drawn extends for 4,000 miles, from Senegal to Angola. Within the area are several regions, whose boundaries are not easily differentiated. Moreover, the names used to describe various regions have varied over time. The list at bottom left provides some of the more common names for the general regions, and the specific countries to which they refer.

Migration of Africans follows a pattern consistent throughout the diaspora. This migratory process has four stages: *primary* is the original dispersion; *secondary* is the move from initial settlement; *tertiary* is migration from the second settlement; and, *circulatory* is movement within several areas of diaspora, including Africa.<sup>(26)</sup> Viewed in the light of this process, it is apparent how a migration of people would mean migration of cultures. The more people moved around the diaspora, the more cultures were transmitted.

The Atlantic slave trade provided the means of migration for the majority of Africans in the New World. The estimates, ranging from 9.6 to 15.4 million Africans removed from West and Central Africa, represent the largest forced migration of people in history.<sup>(27)</sup> Many Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean were relocated to North American colonies, from Florida to New Hampshire. All of the American colonies had African communities, enslaved or free. New York and Rhode Island have freed African descendant communities dating back to the 1700s, distinct from their southern counterparts.

Research shows that ethnic groupings in the southern United States corresponded to specific labor needs. In these places, the cultural retentions are strongest and are an abundant repository for Africanisms. Virginia and Maryland held the largest concentration of Africans in any one place in North America over much of the country's history.<sup>(28)</sup> South Carolina had a black majority by the beginning of the eighteenth century. The vast majority of African descendant people still reside in the southeastern section of the United States. Because of this consistency in the population, vernacular traditions associated with the early populations persist in these areas. The concentration of people of similar language and cultural groups in the same geographic area set up ideal circumstances for the retention of Africanisms.<sup>(29)</sup>

Some Africans voluntarily immigrated to America prior to the end of the Civil War. Cape Verdean seamen, for example, began immigrating to New Bedford, Massachusetts and working in the shipping trade in New England in 1860. After 1865, voluntary immigration from Africa and diasporic places such as the Caribbean, England, and France rose. Some recently freed African Americans left the South after the Civil War. Black exodusters, as they were called, created their own communities in California, Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas. Cities such as New York, New Orleans, Washington, DC, and

Chicago saw a post-war influx of people of African descent. The Great Migrations of the 1920s moved African Americans from the South into industrial cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 accelerated this trend among diasporic African ethnic groups. There were earlier migrations back to Africa in the nineteenth century—to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria—and to Canada as well—to the provinces of Nova Scotia, Quebec, and British Columbia.

Each African migrant group brought traditions that, while not identical, were similar and often had similar foundations. Cultural traditions, folding on to one another, began to intermingle. Several scholars cite a melding of African cultures in the Americas that took place among peoples from three main West African cultural zones: Upper Guinea, Lower Guinea, and Angola Coast.<sup>(30)</sup> Many of the people from these zones had interaction through trade and warfare prior to their re-introduction in the Americas. Prolonged exposure in the crucible of slavery further encouraged the process. The Caribbean and South American colonies had a predominance of Africans, and this fusion clearly affected the vernacular culture. Catholicized pre-Christian European feast days and festivals mixed with West Central African religious culture evolved into Carnivale in Brazil, Madri Gras in New Orleans, and Carabana in Toronto. Shotgun houses appeared in Louisiana with the arrival of free African immigrants from Haiti. A two-room housing form emigrated to the Caribbean with peoples from Bight of Benin, and merged with the Arawak Indian *ajupá* or *bohío* to form the Haitian *caille*. According to prevailing scholarship, the spatial volume of the shotgun and its Haitian prototype is identical to the housing type preferred by the Yorubá in Nigeria, West Africa.<sup>(31)</sup>

### Africans in America

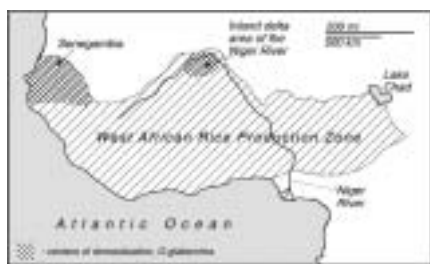
From the earliest settlements in the United States, diverse groups of people lived and worked in interdependent relationships that melded cultural, technological, and social traditions into a distinctive outlook that is American culture. With this, the New World became just that, a “new world,” replete with new institutions, beliefs, and knowledge systems developed from the interaction of nationalities and cultures. The new culture reflected the input of the various participants in the growth of the colonies into a nation.

Africans have had a continuous presence in the Americas for more than 400 years.<sup>(32)</sup> Alonso Pietro was pilot of the Niña on the first voyage. A free African reportedly sailed with Columbus on the second voyage in 1493 as well.<sup>(33)</sup> Other Africans were among the Spanish exploration party that landed in the Carolinas in 1526 and were on hand after the English settled at Jamestown in 1619. The first documentation of free Africans in America was in 1662, in Northhampton, Virginia.<sup>(34)</sup>

Upon their arrival, Africans participated in the building of a nation. Joseph E. Harris notes:

*[p]erhaps the greatest contribution of Africans abroad was labor, which facilitated the accumulation of capital, the advancement of technology, the internationalization of banking and insurance, and the general administrative organization, especially in the West...<sup>(35)</sup>*

African Americans did more than clear forests, dredge swamps, and serve as domestic help. Africans who arrived with the early settlers were blacksmiths, farmers, and potters, as well as sailors. African knowledge systems allowed for the development of commercially viable products, with which the wealth of a nation was built.



**Illustration 6:**

This illustration shows areas of rice cultivation in West Africa. The areas correspond with the origins of Africans brought to South Carolina during the height of rice production in the U.S.

Map courtesy of Judith Carney.

Many of the crops developed in the Americas for exportation were unfamiliar to the Europeans trying to cultivate them. Moreover, the crops were foreign to the region as well. However, enslaved

African groups had experience with several of the different crops and technologies. As slavery became an entrenched institution, those in search of labor sought out Africans from regions with specific agricultural experience. The success of rice production in South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana was due to the tidal floodplain system of rice cultivation used in the Senegambia region. From 1730 to 1800, during the height of rice production, a significant number of Africans were imported from rice growing regions in West Africa. In Louisiana and South Carolina, the birth of the indigo industry coincided with the arrival of West Africans in 1721.<sup>(36)</sup>

Through daily activities and interactions, Africans made an imprint on American culture. African styles of cooking merged with European and Native American foodways. The use of rice, a staple of the West African diet, in the Americas is an Africanism. Other crops not developed for exportation,

like black-eyed peas and yams, were added to the European American palate. Archeological research at places such as Poplar Forest in Virginia, tells us much about the dietary and medicinal practices of Africans a generation or so removed from Africa. Single pot meals, like gumbo and jambalaya, are indicative of culinary Africanisms. The cooking utensils have African roots as well. Colono-ware, terracotta vessels used for cooking and storage, are found throughout Virginia and South Carolina. Research has identified a West Central African pottery tradition practiced in the United States, concurrent with the American Indian tradition.



**Illustration 7:**  
According to some western African beliefs, seashells, like those found on a burial mound located in Mount Olivet Cemetery, Washington, DC, 1944 can represent water, the place where the spirits of the dead reside.

Photo courtesy of the Farm Security Administration photographs collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

African words and grammatical patterns permeate American English. “Okra” is an Akan word, and “gumbo” is a Bantu synonym. “Goober” and “jazz” are words derived from West African terms. Most famously, the Gullah dialect bears vocabulary and grammatical links to the Bantu language group. The creolization of English as spoken in the United States has much to do with the African influence upon the language. This influence would later show up in the idioms of blues, jazz, and rock-and-roll. African-derived place-names mark Suwannee Old Town, Florida and Wando River in the Gullah/Geechee region of South Carolina.

### The Significance of Place

Place, according to Yi-Fu Tuan, is defined by the experiential perspective people have of a space.<sup>(37)</sup> The experiences of those who occupied an area are what makes that place significant to them, and in its interpretation to others. In the early years of United States, the ability to define one’s space was limited to those with the means to wealth and power. African Americans were frequently without either, but through a sense of place, borne of collective experiences, found other means.

Living spaces were one way to mark place. Archeology in locations from the Caribbean to New England have found derivations in the footprints of housing constructed by transplanted Africans and that of European housing. The room sizes—12 feet wide for each room in Afro-Caribbean and African American built places, as opposed to the 16 feet standard of European American housing—differ, creating more intimate, protected places.<sup>(38)</sup> Porches were adapted to European architecture in the Caribbean as a means to manage the heat of the tropics. They were the bridge between public and private space, and also served as an additional room for storage.

**Illustration 8:**  
**Interpreted through western**  
**African cosmology, the bottles**  
**and jars atop a sharecropper's**  
**grave in Hale County, Alabama,**  
**1938 symbolize the connection**  
**between the living and the dead.**

Photo courtesy of the Farm Security  
Administration photographs collection,  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs  
Division



Swept earth “yards,” commonplace in West, Central, and East Africa, were widespread in the Caribbean, the Appalachians, and in the southern U.S. through the beginning of the twentieth century. These yards help define the ends of the outside world and the beginning of a personal, experience-influenced space.<sup>(39)</sup>



**Illustration 9:**  
**Swept yards were common in**  
**rural areas in the South. The**  
**practice is traced back to West**  
**Africa. Caroline Atwater, pictured**  
**tending to her yard with the**  
**branch from a tree in 1939,**  
**maintains a tradition dating**  
**back hundreds of years.**

Photo courtesy of Farms Security  
Administration photographs collection,  
Library of Congress, Prints and  
Photographs Division.

The significance of a location did not necessarily lie in the physical space itself, but in how the space was used. What happened in these places also gives them historical value. Churches in historically black neighborhoods can be repositories for information on early African descendant peoples. African American Christianity has decidedly different overtones than that practiced in European American communities. The rituals have a basis in West and Central African spiritual practices, which encouraged dancing, lively singing, and a call-and-response style of participation. Also, “church” did not always take place in a church or physical structure. Other domiciles or forest and wooded areas served as places to congregate.

At several archeological sites around the nation, cosmograms have been found in and beneath dwellings, most recently in Brooklyn, New York. According to Central African belief systems, cosmograms are graphical depictions of the universe. They were drawn in the soil, on walls, or on pottery. In its most basic expression, a cosmogram is a cross (+), with the horizontal line representing the divide between the world of



the living and the world of the departed. The vertical line shows the height of worldly power above the horizon, and the height of spiritual power below it.<sup>(40)</sup> In the case of the Lott home in Brooklyn, corncobs used to construct a cosmogram were discovered in the attic where the enslaved inhabitants resided.<sup>(41)</sup>

Personal effects and other items at gravesites and other funerary practices from Ghana to Angola found correlative practices throughout the eastern seaboard and the southern states. (*Illustrations 7 and 8, pages 14 and 15*) Descriptions of funerals and graves at the African Burial Ground in New York pointed to distinctly African funerary practices. Contemporary accounts of chanting and drumming and remains of pottery and/or seashells found on the graves date to the late seventeenth/early eighteenth centuries.<sup>(42)</sup>

### Conclusion

People of African descent have been partners in the creation of America and American culture from its outset. The sheer numbers of African people who arrived in North America either from the Caribbean or directly from Africa to North America dictate a sizable role in the cultural development of America. African culture contributed greatly to the development and enrichment of the culture now identified with the United States.

Africanisms must become much more visible to historic preservation/cultural resources practitioners. In order to reach this visibility, preservationists must direct their efforts toward non-European historical sources. They must gain a better understanding of the various African ethnic groups and where their initial and subsequent settlements in America placed them.

1. The Historical United States Census Data Browser gives 2,300,031 and Michael Gomez gives 2,328,642 for the number of Africans in America in 1830. This represents 18% of the population in the United States. See "The Historical United States Census Data Browser" web site, available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>; February 12, 2002; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 22, table 2.4.
2. Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), ix.
3. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1971). Grey Gundaker addresses creolization theory in her essay, "Discussion: Creolization, Complexity, and Time," in *Historical Archaeology* 34(3)2000: 124-133.
4. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996); Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora/Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
5. John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 125; John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 201-206. Cf. Merrick Posnansky's discussion of African and Indian knowledge exchanges in the Caribbean and Ferguson on slavery and racism in the Chesapeake Tidewater region. Posnansky, "West Africanist Reflections on African American Archaeology," in Theresa Singleton, ed., *I, Too, Am America: Archaeological Studies of African-American Life* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 21-37; Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 41-44.
6. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941).
7. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939). Frazier's work was a response to W.E.B. Du Bois's examinations into African American culture and life. Cf. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1638-1870* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1896); idem, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1899); idem, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).
8. Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 volumes (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930-1935).
9. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1935).
10. Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1940).
11. George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 31 volumes (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1972-1979).
12. Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1949).
13. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956).
14. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade, A Census* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1970).

15. Charles Fairbanks, "The Kingsley Slave Cabin in Duval County, Florida," in *the Conference on Historic Sites Archaeology Papers* (n.p., 1975), 30-59.
16. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). These are not the only scholars of note on the topic of slavery. Nor are they the only scholars of slavery with contributions to the study of Africanisms. Charles Joyner, Ira Berlin, Sterling Stuckey, Charles Dew, and many more, have contributed substantially to the examination African American culture and its African antecedents. See the bibliography for more citations.
17. Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976). Mintz and Price argued that Africanisms did not "survive," reviving the notion that African American culture was created without the influence of Africa. The book has been re-released, with additional information and a new title, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
18. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).
19. Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground*.
20. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture*.
21. *Afro-American Tradition* was originally published by the Cleveland Museum of Art to accompany an exhibit in 1978. See Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978). Idem, *The Afro-American Tradition*; idem, *By the Work of Their Hands*.
22. Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
23. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).
24. Joseph E. Harris, ed., *The Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982); Joseph E. Harris, *Africans and Their History*, (New York: New American Library, 1972).
25. For many years, Africa and her ethnicities were not a part of the early story of American culture. A view of Africa (and Africans) as a receiver, not donor, of culture was pervasive, beginning in the eighteenth century. The "culturally rich" portions of Africa, Egypt and North Africa, were cleaved from it, aligning Egypt with Europe and North Africa with Arabia. The perception of Sub-Saharan Africa as a savage continent in need of enlightenment allowed for the paternalistic beliefs that, among other things, gave credence to the notion slavery would serve as a civilizing tool. For brief discussions on the invisibility of Africa in history, see Nnamdi Elleh, *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1997) 4-6; Harris, *Africans and Their History*, specifically the chapter titled "A Tradition of Myths and Stereotypes."
26. Harris, ed., "Introduction," in *The Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982), 8-9.
27. The estimates for the total number of Africans imported as chattel into the New World range widely. A lack of complete records and the continued illegal importation of enslaved Africans beyond the cessation of slavery throughout colonies in North America and the Caribbean skew the numbers. Commonly held totals and estimates ranged from 15 to 20 million people, until the publication of Philip Curtin's book *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. Curtin's groundbreaking research puts the estimate at 9.6 million. His statistics are widely used by

- scholars as the best available estimates. Since *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, others, such as sugar technology historian Noel Deerr and economic historian Joseph Inikori suggested higher totals of 12 and 15.4 million, respectively. Hugh Thomas sums up much of the scholarship and statistics in Appendix 3 of his book, *The Slave Trade*. He estimates 11,328,000 arrived in the New World, with a total of 13 million leaving West African ports. See Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 87, table 23; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 804-805, 861-862. Cf. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 18, who confirms Curtin's figures with a comparison to other studies; Noel Deerr, *History of Sugar*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1950); Joseph Inikori, *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).
28. The number, 673,037 free and enslaved Africans in Virginia and Maryland, is based on the 1830 estimated census data. The number of Africans in the Chesapeake region is consistently higher than any other area in census records from 1710 to 1860. See "The Historical United States Census Data Browser" web site, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 295.
  29. Levine argues that although the different languages among the various ethnicities required adaptation techniques, there was a cultural commonality among the enslaved West Africans, and that it persisted and evolved. See Levine, *Black Culture*, 3-5.
  30. John Thornton argues for a cultural syncretism among the West and Central African ethnic groups. Harris acknowledges the inter-African cultural melding that took place. John K. Thornton, *Africa and African in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, second edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 187-192; Harris, "A Comparative Approach," in *The Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982), 113-114. Cf. Harris, *Africans and Their History* for discussions of interaction between various ethnic groups within West and Central Africa.
  31. Vlach, in "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy," outlines the development and transmission of the shotgun house form from the Yorubá in Nigeria to French Africans arriving in Louisiana with the Haitian *caille* during the early eighteenth century. See Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands*, 185-213.
  32. For an alternate perspective, see Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (New York: Random House, 1976). In his work, Van Sertima offers an argument for pre-Columbian contact between East and West Africans and Mezo-Americans in Central America, relying on historic records, and examination of monumental sculpture and similarities between Aztec and Egyptian calendars. Van Sertima's research is controversial and has been disputed by other scholars, but is worth noting, because it cites two different periods of potential interaction over several centuries.
  33. For Pietro and other Africans on board with Columbus, see Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, 87.
  34. Kwame A. Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 783.
  35. Harris, "A Comparative Approach," 123.
  36. See Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 124.
  37. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 8-18.

38. See Vlach's discussion on African-American housing, in *The Afro-American Tradition*, 122-138; also see Arleen Pabón, "Por La Encendida Calle Antillana: African Influences on Puerto Rican Domestic Architecture," in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape. Conference Proceedings, May 9-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2001), 139-143.
39. See Richard Westamcott, "Gardening, Yard Decoration, and Agriculture Among Peoples of African Descent in the Rural South and in the Cayman Islands," in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape. Conference Proceedings, May 9-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2001), 135-138. Cf. Westamcott, *African American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).
40. In his discussion on cosmograms, Thompson describes the different iterations of cosmograms, to include crossroads. According to Thompson, it was where one went to gain favor from the cosmos and to reach ones ancestors. Forked sticks could also serve as a cosmogram. See Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway, ed., (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 152-157.
41. For more on the Lott home findings, see H. Arthur Bankoff, Christopher Riccardi, and Alyssa Loorya, "Remembering Africa Under the Eaves," in *Archaeology* 54(3)(May/June 2001): 36-40; Brent Staples, "To Be a Slave in Brooklyn," in *New York Times Magazine* (June 21, 2001): 34-37.
42. Shells were found on some coffins, and the presence of pottery on at least one other. See Warren R. Perry, Jean Howson, and Ruth Mathis "New York's African Burial Ground Mortuary Complex in Diasporic Perspective," in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape. Conference Proceedings, May 9-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2001), 147-150.





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